

Washington, DC -- Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today announced that he has restored \$4 million for the Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) as part of the Fiscal Year 2013 Interior Appropriations bill. The Highlands program, which protects water quality and promotes tourism in the Hudson Valley, was slated to be completely cut, but Hinchey used his position on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior to reverse that. The Interior Subcommittee approved the funds today.

"It's critical that we continue to provide an appropriate federal investment to ensure the continued protection of The Highlands," Hinchey said. "I was disappointed to initially see funding stripped for this local environmental priority, but was very pleased to use my position on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior to restore this money. As this bill moves through Congress, I intend to seek additional funding for this important program. The Highlands play a prominent role in both the environmental health of the Hudson Valley as well as its economy through tourism and other activities.

The HCA matches a federal investment with funds raised by New York State and private land conservation organizations to protect the Highlands -- 3.5 million acres of undeveloped forest, farmland and rugged hills stretching from Pennsylvania through New Jersey and New York to Connecticut. In addition to being the source of drinking water for 20 million people, the Highlands attract 15 million visitors each year who enjoy hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation. It contributes substantially to the Hudson Valley's \$4.7 billion tourism economy that sustains 80,000 jobs.

Passed by Congress in 2004, the HCA recognized that conservation of the Highlands is vital to the region's prosperity. The HCA is specifically targeted to generate tangible outcomes and broad public benefits. Protection of the Highlands is a collaborative endeavor, with federal support matched 100 percent by state and local governments and private organizations, making Highlands funding an effective leveraged investment of federal resources. The private land conservation community has been supportive of these efforts, often serving in a pre-acquisition role to position projects prior to federal and state engagement, thereby maximizing the application of limited public resources in a true spirit of public-private partnership.

The HCA authorized \$100 million in land conservation projects and \$10 million for forest service programs in the Highlands. While the program has only received a portion of the allowable funds over its history, the HCA has delivered on its promise to support the work of New York State in achieving the mission of its Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and

has leveraged more than \$11 million in state funds.

Many visitors to the Highlands enjoy the ridge-top topography and thinly wooded summits that offer panoramic vistas of the Hudson River and the region. The Highlands contains unique natural habitats ranging from brackish tidal marshes and mudflats along the river's edge to pitch pine-oak-heath, rocky summit forest and rocky grasslands at higher elevations. In between, the mountain slopes are dominated by oak hickory and chestnut oak forests. The region supports several state-listed threatened species, such as eastern timber rattlesnakes, bald eagles and least bitterns.

Protecting the natural functions of the Highlands saves tax dollars by reducing the need for costly man-made infrastructure. A recent survey of 27 water suppliers found that for every 10 percent increase in forest cover in a municipal water system's watershed, costs of water treatment decreased by 20 percent. The Highlands also provide substantial health benefits. Its trees sequester pollutants that contribute to asthma, lung cancer and cardiovascular disease, while releasing oxygen. Woodlands and wetlands collect and purify water that filters into the ground to recharge local aquifers, which communities depend on for drinking water. Vegetation and wetlands also intercept rainfall, preventing it from flowing into streams where it could cause flooding. Maintaining biodiversity plays an important role in preventing diseases such as West Nile virus and Lyme disease.

The Fiscal Year 2013 Interior Appropriations bill, which includes the funds for the HCA, now moves to the full Appropriations Committee where it is expected to receive approval.

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